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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000532

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES POST-TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION PROBLEMS WITH PRIME MINISTER

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead

¶1. (U) Ambassador called on Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse March 14 to discuss problems in post-tsunami reconstruction. (n.b., Rajapakse has no formal role to play in reconstruction process, since the Prime Minister's functions are severely limited under the Sri Lankan Constitution. Rajapakse is an extremely popular and savvy politician, however, and we believe it is useful to update him on our concerns.) USAID Mission Director Carol Becker also attended, as did PM's Secretary Lalith Weeratunga.

¶2. (C) Ambassador told Rajapakse that initial emergency phase of tsunami relief had gone well. US (and other donors) were now concerned about reconstruction phase, however. There were several problems:

-- No clear coordinating mechanism between different entities charged with parts of reconstruction effort: TAFREN, TAFROR, line ministries. President was in overall charge and she could not be approached with every problem.

-- Transitional shelter program was moving very slowly with monsoon approaching (end-April). Disease problems which had been averted in the emergency phase could re-appear then if people were not moved quickly into suitable shelter. Authorities were slow to identify land which donors/NGO's could use for transitional shelter construction, or found only small plots.

-- Related to this was continuing controversy over 100/200 meter setback rule. Affected persons within the exclusion zone were reluctant to move to housing further away if it meant giving up their chance to ever move back.

Ambassador also raised issue of customs duties being charged on relief goods and overall slow clearance of goods from port.

¶3. (C) Rajapakse nodded as Ambassador made each of these points, indicating that he was already aware of them. He said that he agreed with Ambassador that it would be helpful if President appointed an overall coordinator with ministerial rank. He also said that MP's and officials would raise concerns with him, but when asked by the President, would only say: "Everything is fine, madam."

¶4. Rajapakse, who has his own political differences with President Kumaratunga, told Ambassador that he would raise these issues with President this week when he traveled to Tangalle with her for opening of a luxury hotel. He also urged Ambassador to speak to President directly. Ambassador said that he had requested an appointment with President this week for that very purpose.

¶5. (C) Ambassador also mentioned that, in addition to the substance of these issues, there was also a significant public relations question. Governments and especially individual citizens who had contributed so generously to tsunami assistance would turn quickly negative if the program

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were not run right. Media were already beginning to raise questions, as seen in John Lancaster's March 8 Washington Post piece which Ambassador handed to PM.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Though Rajapakse does not control any resources or entities related to reconstruction, and although he has political issues with President, he may still be able to have some influence. PM told Ambassador that President had restricted his tsunami-related activities to his home district of Hambantota, where he has been very active. PM had just been discharged from the hospital, where he had been admitted last week with severe gastritis. Doctors told him it was a result of his irregular schedule and mealtimes. While making light of the issue, PM confided to Ambassador that he had been bleeding internally, and had received two units of blood.

LUNSTEAD